

# Barbarians at the gates

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History remembers Attila the Hun as the ultimate barbarian: ‘the scourge of God’. In the fifth century A.D., the Huns terrorized the Roman Empire. They raided Gaul in the West and the Balkans in the East, even threatening the great imperial city of Constantinople. But the Huns’ impact was much less impressive than their lasting reputation as a fearsome anti-Christian menace. They do not deserve to be condemned as the smash-and-grab nomads who caused an empire to fall.

On 26 January A.D. 447 the emperor Theodosius II refused to wear his glittering imperial regalia; he put aside his heavy purple robes, bejewelled diadem, pearl earrings, and gem-encrusted shoes. He dismissed his golden carriage and his bodyguards in their scarlet uniforms and shining parade armour. Instead the emperor set out from the palace dressed only in a simple white tunic. He walked barefoot – his feet bleeding and his forehead glistening with sweat – along the hard, marble-paved streets of Constantinople. His route can still be followed along the busy, traffic-choked streets of Istanbul: up the hill in front of the great church of Hagia Sophia, along Divan Yolu, and then bearing left at Aksaray Square, and heading south-west towards the shores of the Sea of Marmara (the ancient Propontis). On this painful seven-mile walk Theodosius was followed by high-ranking dignitaries and a great crowd of citizens. As they moved slowly through the city they solemnly chanted the Trisagion, an invocation still in daily use in the Eastern Orthodox Church: ‘Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy upon us’.

## Disaster threatens Constantinople

The normally prosperous and self-confident residents of Constantinople – who assumed as a matter of course that God was on their side – were in penitent and prayerful mood. In the dark hours of the early morning of 26 January an earthquake had shaken the city, severely damaging its defences. Built thirty years before, the Theodosian Walls (which now cut their way through suburban Istanbul) were one of the most formidable military structures ever built in the Roman empire. A series of parallel defences 180 feet deep ran for three and a half miles: two great

walls, 186 towers, two raised terraces, and a dry moat. The earthquake had caused great stretches of these fortifications to collapse; 57 towers had been reduced to heaps of rubble.

Constantinople lay wide open to any invading army. That alone was sufficient reason for an emperor to cast off his royal robes and join his people in prayer. Yet only Theodosius and his closest advisers knew how serious the situation was. They looked at the defenceless city in the terrifying knowledge that, shortly before the earthquake shattered the Theodosian Walls, the northern frontier had been breached. According to the latest reports, the Huns – commanded by the fearsome Attila himself – had already crossed the Danube. It seemed that now only a miracle could save the imperial capital from destruction: ‘Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy upon us’.

## Trust in God – but restore the walls...

Although never doubting the power of prayer, the Praetorian Prefect Flavius Constantinus (the most powerful government official in the city) had no intention of waiting for God to come to the rescue. He speedily organized gangs of skilled artisans to work on the Walls. They laboured without break for sixty days; during the night masons cut and laid stones by torchlight. The memorial to this extraordinary feat by a terrified and exhausted populace is still visible. To the left of the Mevlevihane Gate is a marble slab, cemented securely into the stonework precisely where Flavius Constantinus ordered it fixed more than 1,500 years ago. On the slab, a laconic inscription is still clearly legible (see image to left):

*THEODOSII IVSSIS GEMINO*

*NEC MENSE PERACTO  
CONSTANTINVS OVANS HAEC  
MOENIA FIRMA LOCAVIT  
TAM CITO TAM STABILEM  
PALLAS VIX CONDERET  
ARCEM*

*By Theodosius’ command,  
Constantinus triumphantly built  
these strong walls in less than two  
months. Pallas could hardly have  
built such a secure citadel in so  
short a time.*

This was a proud boast. In the scale and speed of the undertaking, the restored Theodosian Walls surpassed any fortifications that might have been raised by Pallas Athene, the divine protectress of cities and patron of Athens. By rebuilding Constantinople’s defences, Flavius Constantinus had outdone even a Greek goddess. By completing the project in only sixty days, the Prefect had actually made a miracle happen.

## The enemy at the empire’s gates

The Theodosian Walls were repaired in time to discourage Attila from attacking the imperial capital; but Roman troops were unable to prevent the destruction of most of the major cities south of the Danube. This was the fourth time in twenty-five years (in 422, 434, 441–2, and 447) that the Huns had smashed through the empire’s northern defences and pillaged the Balkan provinces. For the Romans, the Huns seemed all the more frightening for being completely unknown. Migrating nomads from the vast steppes of Central Asia, they had suddenly appeared west of the Black Sea in the 360s. In the next sixty years they extended their rule from their base on the Great Hungarian Plain as far east as the Urals and as far north as the Baltic Sea. Under Attila’s leadership the Huns repeatedly attacked the empire in a series of brutal smash-and-grab raids. In 447 they invaded the Balkans, in 450–1 France (penetrating as far west as Orléans) and the following year northern Italy. No other enemy faced by the Romans had ever breached the Rhine and Danube frontiers in the short space of five years. For pious Christians, this trail of destruction confirmed Attila’s reputation as a pitiless pagan savage whose malevolent presence

in the Roman empire could only be explained by God's righteous anger at its sinful citizens.

### **Tales of horror: the Huns in France**

Across France, Attila's attack cut deep into Christian legend. At Reims the looting and slaughter were only interrupted by the bishop, Nicasius. Along with his virgin sister, he was killed while reading from the Bible before the doors of the city's cathedral. While reciting Psalm 119, at the beginning of the twenty-fifth verse, *adhaesit pavimento anima mea* – 'my soul clings to the dust' – Nicasius was decapitated. As his head rolled down the cathedral steps, it was heard to complete the line, *vivifica me, Domine, secundum verbum tuum* – 'give me life, Lord, according to your word'. Nicasius' talking head was sufficient to frighten the Huns into quitting the city. By contrast, Lupus, bishop of Troyes (seventy miles south of Reims) had to deal with the Huns as they prepared to attack. After prayer and fasting, he went out to face Attila. 'Who are you?' asked Lupus fearlessly. Attila, in an apparently learned biblical reference (to Isaiah 28:15), countered, 'I am Attila, the scourge of God'.

### **The Huns in the context of history**

Saintly exaggeration aside, at least some of the Huns' fearsome reputation is deserved. There is no doubt that the Huns' swift and unpredictable raids on the Roman empire terrorized its inhabitants. For them Attila truly merited the title of 'scourge of god'. Yet it is also worth pointing out that compared to other peoples who broke through the frontiers in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Huns' military record is not so strikingly impressive. In the 370s, 150,000 Goths (men, women, and children), some allowed by the Roman authorities to cross the Danube, turned against the empire. In August 378 at the Battle of Adrianople (near modern Edirne, 130 miles north-west of Istanbul) Gothic troops wiped out twenty thousand Roman legionaries. In the chilling phrase of the imperial court orator Themistius, in one summer afternoon 'an entire army vanished like a shadow'. Adrianople was the worst defeat suffered by the Romans for seven hundred years; they had not sustained such losses since their crushing defeat by Hannibal at the Battle of Cannae. The Goths forced their settlement within the empire; but they rebelled in the 390s beginning thirty years of warfare that stretched from the Balkans to Italy. In 410, they sacked Rome and remained a hostile force until granted land in south-western France in 418.

Attila cannot boast such successes. The Huns were never more than raiders who

pillaged cities, seized gold and enslaved prisoners-of-war. They never settled permanently within the Roman empire. The Huns never became part of its history. The Goths converted to Christianity; their rulers and their courts self-consciously copied Roman models; their historians skilfully rewrote their violent, anti-Roman past. The steadfast refusal of the Huns to abandon their traditional beliefs meant they could easily be demonized by Christian writers. But, in truth, the Huns were no more of a threat to Roman rule in western Europe than either the Goths or the Vandals. Certainly the Huns should not be singled out either for blame (as the cause of the empire's fall) or for praise (as a spectacularly successful military machine).

### **The Theodosian walls across the ages**

In the end, the Huns' record speaks for itself. Unlike the Goths, they never conquered any Roman territory; they never held any of its cities; they never wiped out a Roman army in pitched battle; they never sacked Rome. And despite four Balkan campaigns the Huns never managed to take Constantinople – though perhaps Attila can be excused that last failure. Rebuilt after the earthquake in 447, the city's massive defences shielded it for another thousand years. They withstood the Avars in 626, the Arabs in the 670s, Krum the Bulgar in 813, the Russians in 860, and the First Crusade in 1097. The Theodosian Walls were finally breached in 1453 by Mehmet the Conqueror, whose Ottoman army had one explosive advantage that Attila would have envied – gunpowder.

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